

Growing plants for the Lord – Thanksgiving Day

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Bible Text: Mark 4:1-25; Mark 4:20
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Congregation, Thanksgiving day is supposed to be a happy day. A day with joy and optimism and gratitude. You know, if there's no joy in Thanksgiving what type of Thanksgiving is that? Come grudgingly saying, "I thank thee," with no joy. Oh, may the Lord gives us that true joy and gladness in thanksgiving, but not only that, the true Thanksgiving is also very humble, broken. Rejoice with tremble, right, it says in Psalm 2? The combination, rejoice with trembling. Or the purpose of Thanksgiving day is, of course, to render the Lord thanks but also to be humbled and to rejoice with trembling. Well, we have seen the fruits of the field, we have seen the combines all over the land again, and in different ways there is harvesting, was it also harvesting for the Lord? Was it also bearing fruit in our personal lives? Was there 30, 60, 100-fold to be seen in our personal lives? What type of fruits should we have been bringing forth?

I always think about that and I thought of that text of Mark 4:20 which is our text, our main text. Mark 4:20,

20 And these are they which are sown on good ground; such as hear the word, and receive it, and bring forth fruit, some thirtyfold, some sixty, and some an hundred.

So far.

I have been struggling with those points in the text and in this chapter so let me give you the points and then also give the alternatives and see something of the struggle. So I finally have chosen this: growing plants for the Lord. And I have four thoughts. In the first place, no plants. Do you see that field, no plants? Do you see that piece? Nothing, nothing green. No green. No plants. Secondly, withering plants. Do you see the withering plants? They were growing but they don't look good at all. It's brown. And choked plants. They don't bring forth fruit unto perfection. It stops half-way. And then the fruit-bearing plants. But I also could have used points like: no hearing; shallow hearing; double hearing; real hearing. Or I could have chosen four: an unresponsive heart; an impulsive heart; and a preoccupied heart; and well-prepared heart. I'll come back to that. But I think in Thanksgiving day I like the first one: no plants, growing plants for the Lord; no plants; withering plants; choked plants; fruit-bearing plants.

So we are again at the lake of Galilee in the north of Israel and there is a crowd of people, a multitude of people, so many, they want to listen to the sermons of the Lord Jesus. He is so interesting. They love it and the Lord Jesus must have felt kind of pushed slowly further into the sea, so he was stepping into a boat and they made a little distance from the people, from the shore, and so he had a pulpit in the boat. And you see all those people and they look at the Lord Jesus and they can understand him and they have the beautiful backdrop of the mountain and the lake, and the Lord Jesus tells them a parable, also the parable of the sower and the seed. So we see it happening, we see a farmer with a leather strip around his neck and a trough or a box with seeds and with handfuls he takes the seed out and he has this special skill of evenly spreading it over the field handful after handful. And let's have a look at what's happening to the seeds. I see some seeds rolling over the path by the wayside on the place that has been trodden, the places that are hard soil and they will not be plowed and the kernels, the seeds just lay there and nothing happens to them. Well, actually something is happening. I see birds coming down and they see them, they are laying there so exposed, so openly, and they pick them up and devour them. They're gone. No plants.

And the Lord Jesus told that also some seed fell into a thin layer of topsoil. They fell on the rock, not really the rock it's some of it on top of the rock was also some soil. Compare it to the soil closer to his hand. Rocky soil. Hard to dig into it and in the spring it looks promising. There's grass and if you don't water it, it withers, and so he also at first it looks so promising because the soil is warm and the seeds are germinating and they're well, and if you sit low at the ground you look over the fields, you see that some places are greener than others are, and you see that's promising but actually it's not. And the sun comes up and there's no root in them and they cannot find water and it withers and it looked so promising but it withers.

And some seeds fall into the blueberries, infested with blueberries and something fizzles out. It's severed as its used for the thistles, the thistle they used for the crown of the Lord Jesus. Same word. So, of course, when you sow some seeds in the blackberries, you don't see much fruit. They are choked. They don't do well. They don't grow. They don't produce any fruit.

And yes, also some seeds fall into well-prepared soil. Well-prepared soil and the kernels are just gone and slowly germinate, and the roots go down and the blades spring up and there's a stalk and there's an ear, and there's harvesting and there is 30,60, 100-fold and the farmer is happy to have that to harvest.

And the people are listening and they don't get it, and the Lord, he is even not bothering to tell them either. He did not teach this parable to make things simple. He did not teach this parable to make it plausible and draw the attention. No. No. As we also see in the Bible, look at verse 9, 10, 11, "And he said unto them, He that hath ears to hear, let him hear. And when he was alone, they that were about him with the twelve asked of him the parable. And he said unto them, Unto you it is given to know the mystery of the kingdom of God: but unto them that are without, all these things are done in parables: That seeing they may see, and not perceive; and hearing they may hear, and not understand; lest at

any time they should be converted, and their sins should be forgiven them. And he said unto them, Know ye not this parable? and how then will ye know all parables?"

It's also explained in Matthew 13 and Luke 8. So there's something mysterious here, something you may not have heard before. Why the Lord Jesus told the message in parables? We always thought he was to explain things and make things transparent. That's not per se the case. It's to hide because the Lord Jesus has been preaching already for some time in Israel and he met so much resistance and he does not want to cast the pearls before the swine. He does not want to cast those pearls before the swine, would like to gather it and shelter it, hide it, and reveal it to the babes, because they have been hardening their hearts.

So we hear that danger now. There's a danger you talk about, the danger that the Lord says, "Go. You have heard this sermon so often, so many years. I'm tired of it. I give you over to yourself. I'm not even telling you anymore. I will tell my people. I will tell my church. I won't tell you anymore. You have heard it not." I'm sorry, that's the Bible, right? I can't skip this. I have to be honest with this, the preaching of the chapter. But then the Lord Jesus explained it to rather that wanted to hear it and asked for it. "And when he was alone, they that were about him with the twelve asked of him the parable. Please explain it to us. We want to know." And I hope that's also the case for you. Do you say, "Please explain it to me. I want to know because I want to be saved. I need a Savior. I need the forgiveness of sins. I have an urgency, something needs to happen." I hope you just don't relax sitting in church kind of, you know, sitting back and see what's happening. No, I hope you have feel that necessity.

What does it mean? I see that sower who sows the seed. Some say, "Well, we don't know who that is." Well, it doesn't say it but in Matthew 13 there is after this parable also the parable of the tares and of the sower as well, a different parable, and there it says explicitly in, I think it's in Luke 7, it says explicitly that the sower is the Son of God. So I feel comfortable with saying that, the sower is the Son of God. And the seed is the word, the word that you hear on Sundays, and the word that you hear in school, and the word that you hear at Catechism classes, and the word that you hear from your parents. The word. Oh, that beautiful, precious seed. And the soil is the heart. So there is that on the wayside heart and is that heart that is impulsive, and there is that heart that is kind of preoccupied, and there is that heart that is well-prepared.

So let us go over that and first talk about no plants, no hearing, unresponsive heart. "And it came to pass, as he sowed, some fell by the way side, and the fowls of the air came and devoured it up. And these are they by the way side, where the word is sown; but when they have heard, Satan cometh immediately, and taketh away the word that was sown in their hearts." That's strange. It was sown in their heart. Really? Now not in the saving sense but it was sown in their heart, it was brought to their attention. It was brought to their mind. It was brought to them. So although that heart was hardened, although it did not get into the heart, it was at least brought to the heart.

So what does that mean? You know, some say, "I know what that means." That means they sit in church and you hear it but you don't really see it, you don't pay much attention, you're kind of sleepy and you're thinking about the farm and other things and family life and your problems in this life, and you just could not focus and the birds pick it up and you don't remember the sermon at all, or hardly anything. That's it. Well, that's not what it means. Absolutely not. It's way worse. You know that path, that hard soil exemplifies the hardness of our heart. It exemplifies something about we read, for example, in Exodus 7:14, "And the LORD said unto Moses, Pharaoh's heart is hardened, he refuseth to let the people go." He refuses. So this. It's not this kind of, "I can't pay attention. The devil draws my attention away. I'm kind of sleepy." No. Don't victimize yourself. Refusing, that's the response by nature, in many cases also practiced. Refusing, saying, "No. No. I'm not interested. I'm not listening. I don't care. I'm indifferent." "But they and their fathers dealt proudly and hardened their necks and hearkened not to thy commandments." That's what it is. Refusing and hardening your neck, so not bowing your neck and bowing your head because it's straight up. "Nobody breaks my neck." That's what it is.

"Yet they hearkened not unto me nor inclined their heart, their ear, but hardened their neck. They did worse than their fathers," Jeremiah 7. There are still people like that. They come to church and they sit in church faithfully with their back straight and refusing to repent. Acts 19, "But when divers were hardened, and believed not, but spake evil of that way before the multitude, he departed from them, and separated the disciples, disputing daily in the school of one Tyrannus." But they hardened and believed not. I just hope that if that's you, that you take it to heart. Hebrews 3, "But exhort one another daily, while it is called To day; lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin." And that Stephanus saying, "Ye resist always the Holy Ghost." It's resisting. It's pushing back.

So that is the heart which is never broken up. There is no fear of God in their hearts. It's that being stiff-necked. It's rejecting Jesus, having no use for him. It's a willingness in resisting the Holy Ghost. It's looking the other way. It's despising Jesus. Despising him, "I don't see anything beautiful there." They don't really care and the word of God is not doing anything and over time their hearts get only harder. Week after week they listen and they don't hear it and they just push it away. They're too busy. It's, "I don't want to." It's not accepting the seed. It's ignoring the seed and it's gone in no time.

So no plants. The farmer has sowed it, the Lord Jesus did, and the seed is the precious word of God and they don't want it. That's so sad. Thanksgiving. You know, maybe you're involved in sowing or maybe in a different way you just do your best and you hope for some results and harvest, this part is very disappointing. If you in your greenhouse or in your field or your home see that certain things don't work and they're not appreciated, you're disappointed. So may the Lord give repentance because the seeds are even not germinating and he'll testify against that in the day of judgment if you ignored such a great salvation. Think about that. Ignored such a great salvation.

Let's go to the second thought: the withering plants or the shallow hearing or the impulsive heart. Verse 5, "And some fell on stony ground, where it had not much earth,"

so there was some earth, there's not much, "and immediately," that's promising, that goes fast, "and immediately it sprang up, because it had no depth of earth," and 16 and 17, "And these are they likewise which are sown on stony ground; who, when they have heard the word, immediately receive it with gladness; And have no root in themselves, and so endure but for a time: afterward, when affliction or persecution ariseth for the word's sake, immediately they are offended." Seed, that is the promising seed.

And there are two words that are asking our attention, at least two words. Immediately, immediately with joy. You know, that sounds so critical. Maybe that's something you don't want to hear and you say, "Don't talk about that. That's scary." It is. It is possible that hearers say, "Wow, that's so beautiful! What a sermon! What a word! What an invitation! I like it! I love it!" And people are just perked up and comforted and have hope and believe with joy. Not forced. Not fake. Genuine. Real joy. And yet although we cannot judge the hearts, the Lord knows, it goes in too fast. It seems that people sometimes are impulsive, they're very sensitive and like this. Jonathan Edwards calls it fleshly spirituality. It's a kind of a self-centered faith. The joy is about me. "I'm so happy. I feel so good. I feel so saved. I feel so going to heaven. I'm so happy with myself." Well, they say with God but they mean with self. "I'm just doing so fine. I feel so energetic, there's enthusiasm in me. I'm not doubting at all. I'm so positive." High emotional experiences and singing and music and lights and atmosphere and certain tone in preaching can just really manipulate people into something.

You know of King Herod? He loved the preaching of John the Baptist. He loved it. Once in a while he asked his servants to get him out of prison to perform for him. "Just preach to me a sermon today, John." And John preached a sermon. He just loved it. He cried, "You preach so well, so serious, so beautiful! It gives me joy!" He was just washing his face after he had been crying, so to speak, and then he sent him back to prison again. He loved hearing it.

And so it is possible that you like sermons or certain sermons or certain speakers to pieces, but joy is not the distinguishing mark, the distinguishing factor for truth. Joy is not. You know, if I had to speak, if I have to mention something that's more profound that gives more hope that something is happening, I would say mourning but I don't read about that here. Immediately joy. I don't hear about, "Be merciful unto me a sinner!" I don't hear that brokenness that, "I've sinned against a good-doing God!" It's not God-centered. There is no humility in there. I don't see that. It's pride, a proud faith in Jesus. It's self-congratulation. It's skipping the preaching of justice; righteousness, sin, guilt, hell is left out almost. And the point is not that they do not believe in Christ. That's the confusing thing. Christ means something to them, it seems. But the point is not there is not a believing in Christ, it's something else because it's easy to believe in Jesus missing repentance.

So the roots cannot go deep. Yes, you can manipulate people's emotions. When you are in certain caves on local islands and other places, Belgium, I've seen them, certain caves and you have those stallectites and stalagmites, those pillars, chalk pillars, it's very wet in those places and it constantly drips and you look at those stallectites, those stalagmites

and it looks so wet. They are wet but they're also hard, and so some people are crying and emotional and glad and happy and their hearts are hard. So that's why people like Martyn Lloyd-Jones and even John MacArthur and others warn against that. They warn against that. They have a problem with that. They don't like it when people work the emotions of people saying, "Now you have to choose today. Now come forward. Come forward now. Now." And they have their ways of kneading them with a direct call upon their will and emotions.

So it's not emotions, it's not the will per se, even not the might only, it's the heart, right? So Thanksgiving day and maybe you like that emotional fix, maybe you like to just join Jesus and sing about him, and immediately receive it with joy for a time. You can also read about that in the Canons of Dort. It's on page 107, in the back of your psalter book on page 107, Article VII in the 3rd and 4th Heads of doctrine, Article IX rather. Page 107. "It's not the fault of the gospel nor of Christ offered therein." Wow. Offered. Some people just say that's not biblical, talk about that, "It's not the fault of the gospel nor of Christ," it's not Christ's fault he is, "offered therein, nor of God," it's not God's fault either, "who calls men by the gospel and confers upon them various gifts that those who are called by the ministry of the word, refuse to come," it's not God's fault that they refuse to come, "and be converted: the fault lies in themselves; some of whom when called, regardless of their danger, reject the word of life," you see, reject the word of life, "others, though they receive it, suffer it not to make a lasting impression on their heart; therefore, their joy, arising only from a temporary faith, soon vanishes, and they fall away." So earlier or later, it falls through. When the persecutions are coming, when it's not so easy anymore then apparently it does not last and it goes again and it might take years before it collapses again. You've got to think of, "He standeth. Take heed lest ye fall." There's the warning.

Then the choked plants. 3. Choked plants. So the double-hearing, the preoccupied heart. Verse 7, "And some fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up, and choked it, and it yielded no fruit," and verse 19, "And the cares of this world, and the deceitfulness of riches, and the lusts of other things entering in, choke the word, and it becometh unfruitful." So with that first thought was kind of rejecting the word, hearing and rejecting, no receiving. In the second thought with those withered plants, they received it with joy. It didn't last. And here also they receive it, that's what it says right in verse 7 and verse 19, 18, "And these are they which are sown among thorns; such as hear the word, And the cares of this world, and the deceitfulness of riches choke the word, and it becometh unfruitful."

So what is that about? Very serious, people. Not so shallow. Not so quick. Sensitive. Interested. They want to know. They understand something of their sins, I would say, or the necessity of Jesus and they are quite stable people. The only thing is in their quest for God and in the faith of Jesus, it's kind of mixed with the love for this life. Their heart is not just in God, Christ, it's divided. It's double. It's being double-minded. It's double-hearing. It's a preoccupied heart so there really is something else in that heart, the world, and you can't serve two masters. You serve one or the other. So in conversion the Lord does not only give that sinner's repent of their sins and feel sorry for them, but also they

begin to value God and salvation and Christ over the world. Over it. Become so much more important. While the people meant here, they are sitting in church but they're not there. They love their lives and their houses and their money and their stocks and their future and their retirement and that's their life.

So they try to serve two masters and weeds choke it. They are too busy with those things. They are looking for a worldly happiness as well and they love this life, and they don't want to go to heaven. They just want to stay here. "I love this life with a passion," and at the same time also compensate it with some faith in Jesus. What do the Canons of Dort say about that? "While others choke the seed of the word by perplexing cares, and the pleasures of this world, and produce no fruit. This our savior teaches in the parable of the sower, Matthew 13." It's the same parable. You know, that might be the most head-on today. We are doing so well still financially and we're all prosperous, prosperous even compared to others in Canada, prosperous congregation, and no complaints and that can also be a curse that it draws us in that the seeds are choked, that the plants don't get light anymore, that the plants don't get fertilized enough and there are no nutrients here but the weeds take it all. All the thorn bushes, all the blackberries are just choking them. You don't see the plants anymore.

Think of Judas. He preached Jesus. He did miracles. But he loved the world. He was a thief. So that transformation was missing and that's what Satan likes. Satan likes to take the seeds away and he likes to let them wither, he likes to choke them. But let us now go to the fourth thought. Before I go to the fourth thought, just a question I would like answered. Who are you listening for, for yourself or someone else? Do you think listening to this sermon, "Oh, he, she should listen to this." And then the same person thinks that, "He should listen to this." You know, I would suggest something: think of yourself.

And then that fourth thought. As you read in verse 8, "And other fell on good ground." There are no good people, right? But "good" here means not ethically good or perfect but "good" means the right ground. "And did yield fruit that sprang up and increased; and brought forth, some thirty, and some sixty, and some an hundred." And that's explained in 20, "And these are they which are sown on good ground; such as hear the word, and receive it, and bring forth fruit, some thirtyfold, some sixty, and some an hundred." So when you are coming home and you talk over the sermon, some may say, "So many conditions. This and that and such and so and you need to meet the standard and that is so depressing." I see your point but, you know, there are no conditions to come to Jesus in the sense of that you have to pay and you have to qualify. Not at all. But you need this, it's a necessity to need that new heart so that the seed will fall in well-prepared soil. That's God's work, right?

In Luke we also find this same parable, in Matthew, Mark and Luke, not in John, but in Luke I read this, Luke 8:15, "But that on the good ground are they, which in an honest and good heart, having heard the word, keep it, and bring forth fruit with patience." So more details. Let's have a look at that. "But that on the good ground are they, which in an honest and good heart." You know that is right on. When the Lord comes with his Spirit,

he makes his honest, absolute honesty. "I don't care what other people say. I don't want to deceive myself. I don't want to deceive others." It's so plain and honest and the Lord makes you honest and the Lord gives you that upright in your heart and you say, "I need to have it right. I need a real faith, repentance." In an honest and good heart, not good in the sense as I said before that you qualify. "Having heard the word," to really hear it and, "keep it." Digest it. Stay with it. "Having heard the word, keep it, and bring forth fruit with patience," with continuance. It goes on. It's not for the time being.

So finally, I see fruits for the Lord. That's what we have been created for, to bring forth fruit unto him, that so Thanksgiving day is to render him thanks and to give him what we owe him, 30, 60, 100-fold. This Thanksgiving day for the Lord and being thankful that the Lord is doing the work. So fruits, what are those fruits? Well, apparently there's a difference among us people, some produce more than others do, right? In what sense? Well, in the first place I think of repentance as a fruit. I may not say quickly, "Sorry," and it's over but all that profound knowledge in your heart that you have sinned against all God's commandments, that you are unworthy of life, that the Lord would not do injustice if he would let you go. To admit it that you're hell-worthy. The repentance and that faith, yet faith in spite of that knowledge of sin and God's holiness, to yet have the highest thoughts of God and hearing the gospel and receiving it, and then also show it in your life, to show it in everything so that people see the fruits.

It affects your money management. It affects your marriage, how you talk to each other, how you communicate, how you live together, you're faithfulness, everything. It affects your parenting. It affects your studying the Bible. Those fruits, there are so many of them. It affects your prayer. Some pray more than others do of God's people. It affects meditating and witnessing and so much more because God's people become afraid of sin. And John Calvin, I think it's John Calvin who is saying that, he says especially at the beginning when the love is so fresh God's people sometimes exaggerate and they don't even dare to step over a straw. And that's love.

You know, some say, "Oh well, but those fruits are actually something else." If not holiness and repentance and faith, what else? They say when someone is converted he begins to talk about it and to win others over for that, and will bless his family, and you see it in the families in the generations that there are 30, 60, 100-fold, and that among God's people in their families you find more of them because of their witness, because the Lord has said also to Abraham, "So shall thy seed be." Well, I am not 100% sure about that, about that explanation but I have to admit it was 21 right after this parable it says, "And he said unto them, Is a candle brought to be put under a bushel, or under a bed? and not to be set on a candlestick? For there is nothing hid, which shall not be manifested; neither was any thing kept secret, but that it should come abroad." So what I know is that it's important.

Also think of Thanksgiving day, that the word goes on, it's passed on, and that all people, family or not, need that same grace, and now to reach out and to sow the seed also for them. Thanksgiving day, think of yourself, that where you fit in, 1, 2, 3, 4. Unresponsive? Impulsive? Preoccupied? Well-prepared? You know, it's Thanksgiving day but let us also

pray, also pray, "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me." No, say to the Lord even if you profess something, say to the Lord, "If I deceive myself, please tell me." Be honest to yourself and having joy in Jesus is not enough.

Lastly, I read in Ezekiel 36 something about stony heart and that beautiful text I suggest that you bring that word to the Lord for yourself or others. "A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you: and I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and I will give you an heart of flesh." Lay it before the Lord and say, "Lord, that such a beautiful word," Ezekiel 36:26, just before, bring it before the Lord and say, "Lord, create a clean heart and I hear about, 'A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you.'" You say, "Lord, me, come to me, 'and I will take away the stony heart.'" He can do that. You know, in this parable there are no changes possible, right? You cannot change from a stony heart to an impulsive heart to a preoccupied heart, but the Lord can do that. You can have a heart as hard as a rock, you can have all the fakeness within you, you can be as preoccupied as you can see, and the Lord can still save you because the Lord Jesus, he is the Word. He is the sower, He's the sower but he's also the Word and he has paid for the application and has paid for the spirit, and he will see his seed and he will be satisfied. The Lord Jesus has paid for it and he will have a church and he will have new ones after your church to save him, to render him thanks to be brought to heaven and to have an eternal Thanksgiving. Not selfish. Not just happy with themselves. But giving glory to the Lamb and to the Triune God.

Thanksgiving day. May this be our prayer, "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me." Amen.